



An Overview of *Vanitas* Paintings

The notion of simplicity shapes the aesthetic tastes, the arts, and ways of life of the Dutch. There is no room for frivolity, idealism or embellishment. Dutch artists popularized *vanitas* paintings in the seventeenth century. Thus, they brought to life the concern for religious piety and a wariness of material and sensual pursuits. *Vanitas* paintings are symbolic still life paintings that consist of a variety of objects, each of which acts as a symbol to represent different ideas. The word *vanitas* translates from Latin to describe the transitory nature and meaninglessness of earthly life.

The origin of *vanitas* paintings stems from a verse in the Bible:

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”

(Ecclesiastes 1:2-4)

Vanitas paintings serve as reminders of the transience of life, the uselessness of pleasure, and the imminence of death. Thus, to the Dutch, such paintings were considered moral compasses in that they warn against sinful indulgence of the senses.

Within these paintings are a variety of symbols that are often utilized by artists. They include:

- | **skulls, rotting fruit, wilting flowers** – reminders of the brevity of life and certain death
- | **hourglass** – reminder of the inability to slow or alter passage of time
- | **youth blowing bubbles** – an allusion to the proverb *Homo bulla*, which translates to mean “Man is like a bubble,” referring to the fragility of life
- | **musical instruments** – refer to how music serves as pleasure for the senses, and how useless this pleasure is upon death
- | **mirror** – refers to beauty as a vain and empty pursuit
- | **exotic objects** – associated with the futility of one’s accumulation of material wealth
- | **lit candles** – refer to the fragility of life—how life can be ended easily

In particular, musical instruments have typically been associated with the enticement of the senses, specifically love and sexuality. The lute is often used to represent lust. Musical instruments act as individual symbols within the larger theoretical framework of the painting.

Many contemporary artists still make use of the symbols associated with *vanitas* paintings, reinterpreting them in a modern context.

